

An Oral History

with

David Del Santo

SSC History Project

Interviewer: Martin Oramous

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Biography

David Del Santo is the Lead Security Officer at Stennis Space Center. He has a Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice. He served in the U.S. Army Military Police Corps for 22 years. He has worked with NASA Security for 6 years at the John C. Stennis Space Center. David is the recipient of numerous military and civil service awards.

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This is an interview by the Stennis Space Center History Office. The purpose of this interview is to document the story of key personnel during/after Hurricane Katrina at SSC. The interview is with David Del Santo and is taking place on November 30, 2005. The interviewer is Martin Oramous. Also present is Shelia Reed.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: Tell us your story about Hurricane Katrina.

DAVID DEL SANTO: My name is David Del Santo. I'm the Lead Security Officer here for Stennis Space Center. It was a lot of responsibilities and I look at Katrina differently than a lot of other folks because I knew I had to be on the ride-out team and be out here before, during and after but I also had to worry about my wife and one of my children and what they were going to do. We came out here Sunday afternoon before the storm. Right away, I had to start to work. I got them up in the Security Staff's little office that we had and took care of them and then I could really concentrate on what I needed to do. One of my biggest jobs is running the Security Department but also answering to the needs of the Emergency Operations Center, in specifically with Ron Magee and Don Griffith with things they couldn't do. In their positions, they are locked into the EOC. They really don't have time to go out and see what's going on in the Center. That's where I come in. I am one of the guys who get out and get to see how many people were coming through the gate, how many boats we have down at the lock system and working with other resident agencies on the installation.

Friday when I left installation and went home, I thought it was going to be like a lot of people, Category 2. I thought I would come out here work for a couple of hours and then go home. Needless to say, when it turned into a Category 4 or 5, things really changed real quick. The morning of the storm we woke up and right away it was pretty intense. You hear that the storm is here and see all the people that took shelter on our Center, they're all on the 1st floor of B1100 and other buildings throughout the center, it really became quite evident that we had a lot more than we thought would show up, especially with the special needs people. These are people that maybe have heart problems or some type of medical problem that became a real quick, overwhelming event for us. I wanted to see what was going on, on the Center as far as gate traffic. People coming on to the Center. The boats and stuff down at the lock system and check on the Security Officers that were located throughout the Center. I was able to do that before the storm. It got so intense for my safety purposes I couldn't go out anymore. Nobody else went out either because the winds were just ferocious. We stayed in 1100 and hunkered down until early in the afternoon. We had our regular meetings with the Center leadership that was here. The Deputy Director, Mr. Throckmorton, he was here the whole time and basically took

charge in giving out a lot of direction and guidance and that helped out quite a bit. Early in the afternoon the eye of the hurricane came over the Center and myself and Mr. Throckmorton and a representative from MEMA wanted a quick assessment of the Center. We went out and were really concerned about people and property. We were checking our people and property. One of the key things we needed to check on was the intersection of Interstate 10 and 607. If that had major structural damage to it, it could put Stennis Space Center out of operations for several months. We took off and immediately we could tell the amount of trees that were down on Trent Lott Boulevard were excessive. We didn't know if we would be able to get down to I-10 or not but we finally did manage. One interesting thing that happened to me on the way down there, I never had this happen before, was a herd of seagulls, about 100 seagulls on the side of the road, usually when you are driving down the road, the birds are going to move for you, well, I'm driving about 60 mph and all of a sudden I hit five seagulls just plastered the vehicle that we were in and I never had that happen before. I told Mr. Throckmorton this is unusual, usually birds move off. We continued on our mission and went down and did an assessment and luckily the I-10 Interchange down there was O.K. We came back and as I said earlier there were so many trees on the road that we couldn't go on the north bound lane. We had to go on the south bound lane to get back in to the Center. We got back in the Center and I was talking to several people about my experience with the seagulls. They said that happens a lot. In hurricanes, they are so exhausted by the hurricane that they didn't have time to react. They were too slow so you hit them. I started to pay attention and the rest of the day I saw several seagulls throughout the installation that had been hit by vehicles.

So we stayed here that night. It finally calmed down a lot. We did assessments. We had lost communications. That really made it a headache but we were able to talk internally with the Navy command and other resident agencies on installation. One of the biggest things that happened, a tornado or high wind, hit the Center Operations Wing, the North Wing of B1100. That's where my wife and daughter were in the security suite. There were a lot of other family members up there. We had to evacuate them. It didn't take the entire infrastructure of the roof away but it took all of the tile and a lot of the insulation. The insulation is about five inches thick and it ended up in the parking lot and destroyed a lot of vehicles' windows. It was quite an event. We had to relocate several times because the water came in and it started on the 3rd floor and ended up on the 2nd floor and eventually wound up on the 1st floor. So, a lot of destruction right from the get go. That wing was evacuated and basically closed up and in the next couple of days and weeks was totally taken apart so they could rebuild it. We had dinner that night and everybody was doing a lot of talking and wondering when we were going to get to go home. Some people were actually worried if they were going to have homes. I listened to one lady who lived down in Pearlinton and she just told me from the get go that she didn't really want to leave because she knew that with the intensity of the storm, she was here during Camille, that she would not have a home. She knew that right from the get go that she really didn't need to go back down to Pearlinton. It was really hard talking to these folks because I'm a transplant here. I moved down here 11 years ago. My family went through George and we went through Ivan out here. I've been through all the storms since Ivan out here but none of them were close to what Katrina did. You heard a lot of stories that

night. Here, we were out of power except for the EOC. The air-conditioning was out. A lot of people took refuge in B1100 and B1110 and throughout the Navy and resident agencies out here. So, we were worried about them and making checks. Being the Lead Security Officer, I was worried, making sure we took care of our Security Officers out here. At that time, we had already started working on our 18 so everybody was pretty physically and in some cases emotionally drained by the time they went to bed.

The next morning I needed to get out of here because I needed to find out if I had a home left. We left like a lot of other families real early that morning. I live in Long Beach. We took off and went down there. I was prepared for a lot of destruction but when we went over the Interchange of I-10 and Highway 603, that was a lake. The water was up almost to the top of the road. All the facilities down there and I know one building in particular that was recently built, was totally gone. Everybody was stopped on the side of the road. This was when traffic was minimal because there wasn't really many people out. We were able to get to Exit-28 and turn in to Long Beach and again it was one way down the street Beatline strictly because of the trees all over the place. You had to be careful for the electrical wires. When we pulled in our subdivision, we saw a lot of destruction and a lot of the pine trees. I'm not talking about diseased pine trees. I'm talking about old real pine trees that were a foot, a foot and a half, two feet in diameter that were split just like toothpicks. In our subdivision, that is where most the damage occurred. The pine trees fell on roofs of houses and caved them in. We turned the corner and got down in front of our house and we had an idea that the fences would all be down. They are kind of made that way. We had some damage to our Magnolia tree. None of the windows were broken. We were looking at the north side of the house. We really didn't see any major damage to the roof. We ran around to the back and we could see the south side of the roof and that was particularly where all the damage was. All the fences were down and a lot of the roof tiles were gone and that's where most of the damage to our house occurred. I wanted to do a quick cleanup as much as possible because I was going to leave my wife and child there and I needed to get back to work because I had responsibilities out at the Center. We did some initial cleanup. We prepared in a way at the house. In our freezer we had probably 15 half-gallon frozen bottles of ice. We knew if we didn't open the freezer that that could stay for probably two days until the power came back. The refrigerator is a different thing. If you open it up, you got a little there. The refrigerator on top you got maybe a day and a half or two but after two days you really need to get out all the steaks and all the chickens and have the barbecue. Invite the neighbors over and then it starts over. It becomes a day to day thing. I was fortunate that I was able to stock up on a little of gas a couple of days before the storm. So, initially I had enough gas to get back to and from the Center. At that time, once I knew the house was O.K. and my wife and child that were there, they were O.K. that I needed to get back there and focus on my responsibilities at the Center. I went back to work and they stayed home and continued the cleaning. There was no power and no air-conditioning. That was one of things that they were not really used to. They stayed home did that and I went to work and from the time I got back it was hard to imagine. Everybody was doing a lot of work and in a lot of cases they were doing work that they were not traditionally assigned to. We don't have Security Officers routinely in our dining facility. We don't have Security Officers posted at the gas station. We don't have a Security Guard out in front of the Medical Facility.

We had to do a lot of adaptation on the needs of the Center. For my part, it is to provide security to the Center and taking directions at that time from Mr. Throckmorton and later Admiral Donaldson would come out of the Test Stand area down here. Our immediate needs were communications. We had no off-center communications and that became a real big problem and one that we are going to work on fixing in the future. For three days, it was like that until we got power back. Day by day you heard it was going to get better tomorrow. I think it really did. In B1100 if you had no power, it could really be a headache. We had a lot of people in there. A lot of people were special needs folks that you had to spend a lot more time with. We started having regular meetings. There were a few people from Center Operations and the other Directorates to include Admiral Donaldson and Mr. Throckmorton. That was probably one of the better things because we had the two Senior Leaders of the Center right here. We had the decision makers that could make the decisions at that time. Ron Magee from Center Operations and Don Griffith from the EOC they were there but they were really busy with the requirements of running the EOC and what was going on there. Within a day or two, after the storm, we had our first helicopter come in from Marshall Space Flight Center and they brought in a MRSEC unit and satellite phones. We got those up and established outside communications. I deal with OSPP, the Office of Security Program Protection at Headquarters and was able to talk to the folks that I needed to up there. A lot of people in my area wanted to send down additional Security Officers to the Center. That was fine if we needed them but at that time I talked to Bill Turner who is our Program Manager here for Paragon. I talked to Bill two or three times a day and I said, "Do we need additional officers. I can get ten officers. I can get a Captain. Everything is open to us. NASA is going to send whatever we need to relieve us." Bill kept saying, "No, David we're fine." The initial two or three days where we were working 18 hours a day that was over with. We established a 12 hour shift. No days off but we established 12 hour shifts and we were bedding down our Security Officers. They either went home or we provided them a location on the center to rest. Actually, our biggest need at that time was washers and dryers for the Security Officers to wash their clothes. When I talked to my security counterparts at Headquarters, they said, "David what do you need? Do you need additional officers? Tell us what you need? Anything is the limit." I said, "I need two washers and two dryers. I need 200 gallons of soap and 400 foot extension cords because I need to wash these officers' uniforms. We don't know how long we are going to be here." At that time power was very limited on the Center. So, they got that in the supply chain as others. Our Contractor Organizations at the Center also put in wish list back to their Headquarters on what they wanted and again washers and dryers quickly became a hot item here because we had people that were working very hard and they were sweating and they needed to wash their clothes as soon as possible.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: Was that something that you didn't really expect? I know that was probably one of the last things Headquarters expected you to ask for. Anything else come to mind? It was a unique situation. You had thousands of people here.

DAVID DEL SANTO: Right. We were getting worried because for a couple of days we had plenty of food for these folks but really didn't know, especially during the crisis phase of the operation, we really didn't know how long we were going to have to feed

three meals and sometimes four meals to not only the ride-out crews and their family members that were here but also the people that sought shelter out at Stennis Space Center. We were really worried about that. We started having meetings. Gas got to be a real problem because with electricity being out, in my case at my home it was out for eight days, here it was out for several days but getting gas was a real problem. We had a limited amount here on the Center and that was really used for our emergency vehicles. We ran out of a lot of that and we had to establish a supply chain. MSS worked through Shaw group and were able to start that. Eventually we had gas coming in but at my home if you had a two gallon gas tank sitting outside and it wasn't chained down it would become missing very quick because gas became a real big commodity that you needed. I was fortunate to stockpile a little of the gas and had enough that I was able to get out here.

As we transitioned through the storm, again it became a big thing on who was out here and what they were doing. NASA wanted to send us a lot of people and a lot of specialties. Some people were really good hearted and they wanted to show up and help the Center to recover. We had certain needs for certain people. We had a responsibility that once we had a change over that we were going to assist MAF on coming back on board. They became an island out there. When the Center Director came from Marshall Space Flight Center, Mr. King, and O.J. from the security team and they also had some facility folks and flew over there. Their biggest thing at first was just having water and MREs and some food to eat and establishing security and communications over at Marshall Space Flight Center. Providing support from Marshall to us was a lifeline at that time and to MAF. It became not only a Stennis initiative but it also became a NASA initiative real quickly. We had a change of Directors after three or four days. Maybe five days. Mr. Parsons came back to the Center and assumed control. For some people that was an adjustment but it seemed fine. When Mr. Parsons came in here he established meetings. We were having meetings all the time but we had different meetings with different folks. Some were with contractors and residents only and some were with Senior Management and Critical Needs People to get the Center back up. I went to almost all of those meetings from time to time. Mr. Parsons stated from the get go the biggest thing is people. We've got to take care of our people. Everybody who was at those meetings really understood that we had to take care of our persons here, not only the NASA government guys and the Navy folks but the contractors that support this organization here and the Center. That is what we were going to do. We're going to take care of them and the people who sought refuge here.

Day by day, everyday I would try to come in and something else would be up. One day it would be the electricity and one day it would be the air-conditioning and then we would start having gas lines. Then we started getting gas trucks with lots of gas. I mean the lines went down very quickly. We couldn't fill up cans but after five or six days we even let them fill up the gas cans. Things started getting back to normal. I think it was the following Monday where a lot of the Center leadership showed up. Then the Contractor leadership showed up to our morning meetings. Those morning meetings were called a "Tag up". That's where the decisions were made for the day. What we were going to try to do. At that time, the big thing was power, fuel, people, security and IT

communications. Our communications were a real problem that we were working on and we would continue to improve on through some of the after action reports that are being done. After the 1st week every day things improved and more and more people started coming back and then we had accountability of people. The biggest thing is you heard so many different stories. People would come in and they would have no home. I remember one of the Coast Guard guys was holding a little baby in his hands. The father had been up in a tree for a day and a half caked with mud. It was hundred of stories like that. It was hard for me because here I am worrying about stuff associated with my home but I had responsibilities here that I couldn't go home. I needed to be here and I needed to take care of business and a lot of that was supporting EOC and what comes out of there.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: You are right. At first, just as you wanted to, a lot of people wanted to go back and check on their homes but they couldn't because there was no gas. Was there any way to let them go do that? Was that a part of your security problem?

DAVID DEL SANTO: It was a problem because some people wanted to leave and some people quite honestly needed to leave. We worked an initiative where gas was provided but they left the Center and didn't come back. A lot of people left the Center and they didn't have a place to go to. I know one gentleman personally works in an office across the hall from mine and he is a NAVO government employee. He went home and three or four hours later I saw him come back to his office. His house was gone. That was the kind of stuff we were dealing with. We heard stories like that all of the time. Later on it was put out that almost ¼ of the people that worked out here, regardless who you worked for or what kind of job you had either lost their home or their home was unlivable. That is a big challenge for the leadership of the Center regardless of what organization you worked for and a lot of hard work. They started different initiatives. We had people going out and helping people in the communities. We were giving shots. As soon as we got the shots we were inoculating people on tetanus and other diseases. Different things started to happen. After about the 1st week to ten days, things started to get back to normal on the Center. The lights were working. The food was coming in. There was plenty of gas. People had jobs and reports that they had to do but it was still in the recovery phase.

Yesterday was three months after the storm. It is still recovering. I live in Long Beach. This weekend my wife and I went down Highway 90 and drove the beach from Long Beach to Pass Christian and for four blocks up there is nothing at all. My wife has to go over to Turo Medical Center every week or so. If you get off at the Twin Span to about ½ mile on the other side of the high rise, there are no lights at nighttime except for the Sam's Super Center that has a FEMA emergency power pole sitting there but other than that there are no lights in those areas for those people. This is three months. People in other places don't really understand what went on down here. I can tell you from Mississippi's side of the house. It is going to take months but over in New Orleans in some of those areas over there, it will take years if they even recover at all. So, this is an on-going thing and we really need to... I'm a small section. There's myself and four other people. We had one guy totally lose his house. Another one had several thousands dollars worth of damage. On the contracting side, the Security Program Manager lost his home. We had 17 Security Officers out of 70 that lost their home. This is hard to swallow

because we still had jobs here that we had to come in and support the Center. Those are things that we had to deal with on a day to day basis.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: This whole part of the country and all the communities around here just changed literally over night. What has that meant for you from the Security standpoint before the storm after the storm? How is it different? Do you have different responsibilities, a different mindset, different objectives?

DAVID DEL SANTO: On the security side of the house, we were able to make our mission here. Headquarters, they were ready to send all the Security Officers I needed. I could have gotten them like that. Fortunately, we didn't need them here but I know if I needed them I could have call. That plan is in place. We've done that. If we had to send people to Kennedy we had a plan there. If we had to send them to JSC, we could send them there. This time it was Katrina and us getting kicked. So we had to worry about this place. I had to daily make that assessment. One time I was almost real close to asking for help. I made a decision not to do that and it was the right decision but I will tell you next time I'm going to be more astute. I think when we do some of our After Action Reviews that NASA may even have to look at staging security forces and facility specialists in certain areas. For example, if Kennedy is going to be struck by a Category 3 or 4 we may want to send some people to Orlando that can come in hours instead of the next day. We may want to have air platforms, either NASA air platforms or DOD air platforms available to us ahead of time. Our biggest thing here is we are going to have to do a total reevaluation of communication assets within NASA and at the Centers. That's being done as we talk. I think that one of the things that was a real realization to me was that we had eight days with no power at my house. Day 1, 2 and 3 was no problem because we had plenty of food and ice and everything in the refrigerators was frozen. My wife cooked the steaks and the Cornish game hens and that lasted for a day. The next day I went home and I sat in the Salvation Army food line like a lot of other people because I needed a hot dinner not so much for me but I needed it for my family because at that time there was really no food left. We had some MREs that were left. We had plenty of water that I stocked up on. It didn't matter who you were. You didn't have power for eight days and some people still today; three months later some still don't have power. So, they are out in that Salvation Army and the American Legion food line even tonight. I never thought I would have to do that.

Three weeks after the storm I briefed Katrina Operations at the NASA Security Officers Conference and I told them the same thing. I never thought that I would have to sit in a food line. It didn't matter who you were or what kind of job you had or what your income or your background was. All you needed to do at that time was worry about providing some food, cold water and ice for your family. I was one that was down there but again that was for a short period of time and things started coming up. One thing I tell friends of mine is that I went down to CVS pharmacy to pickup some medication for my wife. At that time it was long lines at the pharmacy. There was a girl behind me. It was day 8 and we had power come in and off at my house. There was lady standing behind me and I was talking to her. I asked, "Have you got power back at your house yet?" She looked at me and said, "Honey, I ain't got a house and my husband ain't got a job and I ain't got a

job and I ain't worried about power right now." I felt so stupid because here is a really dumb question I asked this lady. We talked for a while and then the prescription line moved on and as I was walking out she came up and said, "I'm going to be at a party ten years from now and tell this joke about this young guy who came up and asked me a real dumb question." We laughed about that.

That is really about it. We are still in the recovery, rebuilding phase of the Center here. It's better every day. A lot of hard work was done by a lot of people. The biggest thing is everybody stood up really well. I don't want to go into names because I could sit here all day and tell you them. It didn't matter who they were. Everybody stood up and did their job really well here. That was important to see. Mr. Parsons and Mr. Throckmorton and the Navy Admiral have been around for a long time. They could see what fine work was done by the different people. I'm a small part of it. I'm a Security Chief. I support the rest of the Center. We had guys like Don Griffith. Don was up 3 or 4 days straight providing the EOC support for this Center. I really felt proud of Don because he really gave it his all. There are a whole bunch of Don Griffiths out there.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: None of us has been through anything like this because it's never happen before. You mentioned that you had been through Ivan and George and those other storms. Were you part of the ride-out crew for those storms?

DAVID DEL SANTO: I was for Ivan. I was not for George. I was TDY with the Department of the Army at that time. Ivan I was, totally different.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: You were part of the ride-out crew for Katrina.

DAVID DEL SANTO: Yes, before, during and after.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: Could you tell us what your responsibilities were and what it was like compared to the previous storms?

DAVID DEL SANTO: It was just a lot more intense. During Ivan, I was strictly worried about security because our plan went smoothly. Katrina was just so immense and so long. There was so much more destruction. Before with Ivan, we were lucky because Ivan made a right angle at the last minute and went over to Mobile and Pensacola. Well, Katrina came right towards us. It was a massive storm. It was more than 100 miles wide, from New Orleans over to the Alabama, Mississippi line. It was so much more damage. Thousands of people lost their houses and the infrastructure in a lot of these cities and towns. Even today, there is no income coming in there. You can't go out and eat a dinner downtown because there are no waiters and half the restaurants aren't open if you want to go out and eat. Our casino industry is gone. It will be gone at least until December when the first ones open up. It was just a lot more intense. Out here we were really overwhelmed on the amount of people that showed up because we had a lot more people than we expected. The family members of employees were here and the ride-out crews. The special needs people and also the people that sought refuge. A lot of people said they would never leave their house. They stayed in their house on previous storms. Well they

left their house this time and needed to come to some place where they felt safe and that place was Stennis Space Center. We took care of them. It was a challenge. It was a challenge that was met but it wasn't an easy challenge. I think the biggest thing is regardless of planning, you have a lot of plans. I have plans in Security. The Center Operations has plans, the military and even the civilian contractors have plans. You have got to be flexible because those plans are written when you aren't in a crisis mode. When you are in a crisis mode and that was for the first three days of really right after Katrina and the immediate days after, things change. You have to adapt to the crisis at hand. We did that here. We met the challenge and we're going to write up a lot of things in our After Action Reports and next time we're going to meet it again but hopefully Katrina won't visit us for a long time.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: I'll agree with that. Is there anything you can think of that we haven't touch on or talked about strictly from your security point of view that people might be interested in or that would be really good to have down for the record?

DAVID DEL SANTO: I think the really good thing about this is that I knew that I could call on NASA Headquarters to my security counterparts up there and I could have anything I needed as quickly as possible. That is the thing that is going to stick in my mind because previously we had drawn up plans to move some of our security forces to Kennedy to support them. I really didn't think that much about it. We would tell them to go and they would do a fine job but I now I know the importance of that. That was a good feeling to be able to sit back to know if I needed a Captain and ten Security Officers I could get them or if I needed that washer and dryer to come in that nobody even thought about, that was a real big deal when we started getting those, the little creature comforts that came in, the calls home. The guy who hired me out here, he knew that I had access to a satellite phone and he asked me to call his wife in Hawaii and I did. It was such a comfort to him and her that I said her husband was O.K. but he hadn't been to the house but I was able to do that, just the little things. The dining facility, the meals that they provided to hundreds and thousands of folks that ate in there daily. The Center Director being out here and being in charge. That was a good thing having the Admiral and then Mr. Parsons and Dave Throckmorton out here leading the way and the Admiral from the Navy on their side of the house. That was important because the people saw it. Mr. Parsons said, "Take care of your people". We did that at Stennis Space Center.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: Very Good.

(End of Interview)